

Queensland Government Agency Comments

Backing Indigenous Ability Discussion Paper

Backing Indigenous Ability: Delivering a Comprehensive Telecommunications Package in Indigenous Communities
Discussion Paper (Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, March 2006)

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide Queensland Government agency comments in relation to the *Backing Indigenous Ability* discussion paper released by the Australian Government Department of Communications, Information Technology, and the Arts (DCITA), which addresses the \$36.6 million telecommunications element of the *Backing Indigenous Ability* program.

The design of *Backing Indigenous Ability* is a particularly salient issue for Queensland, given the following demographic characteristics:

- The 2001 census (ABS) identified that Queensland had the second largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in Australia (112,772), second only to New South Wales (119,865).
- This equates to 27 per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ABS, 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey).
- 69 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland live outside southeast Queensland.

Queensland Government agencies broadly support the following design principles outlined in the discussion paper:

- that access to telecommunications is an essential service, necessary 'to participate in Australia's economic, social and cultural activity'
- the importance of culturally appropriate delivery of services
- the use of a community building approach that includes recognition of the value of partnerships and local ICT 'champions'
- the value of coordination and integration of programs, structures and activity at Commonwealth, State, local government and community level, including the merit of building on existing successful programs and models

In particular, Queensland Government agencies:

- **support the coordinated use of existing infrastructure and services**, established through previous state or Australian Government initiatives. Structures such as Cape York Digital Network, Learning Network Queensland, State Library of Queensland and the Lagaw Asmer (Island Watch) project represent significant financial and social investment by both governments and communities, and provide a potential foundation for strategic partnerships and collaboration within and across sectors and jurisdictions that could support future project sustainability.
- recognise that **expectations of financial sustainability of ICT projects in Indigenous communities are unrealistic**, particularly at community level, and that some level of ongoing government intervention and subsidy will be required for such projects to be viable.

A number of further issues also require consideration in order that communities receive full benefits from *Backing Indigenous Ability*. These are outlined in the following pages. Where the discussion refers specifically to questions raised in the discussion paper, these have been highlighted in the left margin.

Discussion

Identified needs

Backing Indigenous Ability addresses ongoing deficiencies in telecommunications services and infrastructure identified in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It builds on previous initiatives such as the Telecommunications Action Plan for Remote Indigenous Communities (TAPRIC) and Networking the Nation (NTN).

Q1 Where did TAPRIC and previous initiatives fall short?

Based on previous experience, some possible improvements to enhance outcomes at community level include:

- More effective communication with applicants on the progress/status of applications
- Improved timeliness in decision making
- Channels for increased engagement and consultation with applicants throughout the process
- Recognition of the time involved to build support for and implement new initiatives in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Recognition of and flexibility to deal with industry developments that impact upon *BIA* projects.

A key principle outlined in the *Backing Indigenous Ability* discussion paper relates to the value of building on existing telecommunications models, activities and infrastructure.

There is, however, a plethora of ICT funding programs at national, state and local levels, and significant community activity associated with these. It is therefore difficult to gather up-to-date and comprehensive knowledge of the nature and quality of initiatives and infrastructure that exist in communities, and to identify gaps or weaknesses in service provision and effective ICT management processes.

Q2 How can the design and delivery of *Backing Indigenous Ability* be optimised to achieve long term sustainable quality telecommunications solutions for Indigenous communities?

Without this knowledge base, governments and communities will face significant challenges in successfully identifying, coordinating and implementing further appropriate ICT projects in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

It is therefore important that to achieve optimum outcomes the *Backing Indigenous Ability* program guidelines, first, support **the identification of local need through gap analyses, and the gathering and dissemination of ICT information** across levels of governments and communities.

Second, optimum outcomes will only be achieved if *BIA* guidelines **support the linking of funded projects into wider networks and initiatives related to social, cultural and economic development**. For example, the establishment of a centralised ICT help desk project could include coordination and collaboration with Queensland agencies and organisations (eg TAFE, Learning Network Queensland), Australian Government structures (eg the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, ICCs), universities, local government and/or commercial providers, to establish motivating and challenging employment through ICT apprenticeships; administration, marketing and management traineeships; leadership mentoring; or small business opportunities. This approach also provides an environment in which experimentation and learnings from pilot projects can contribute to future excellence without the risk of failure attaching to communities.

Shared community phones

Queensland Government agencies note three important considerations related to the further implementation of community phones.

- As noted on the DCITA website,¹ community phones are not covered by the USO and do not appear on the Telstra Standard Marketing Plan. Standard consumer safeguards such as the Customer Service Guarantee do not apply to these services. Given that community phones, like payphones and residential services, address basic entitlements to telecommunications services, **consideration should be given to the inclusion of community phones under the USO**, and their coverage by appropriate consumer safeguards.
- Queensland Government agencies recognise that community phones **play a critical role** in providing telephone access in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in terms of contact with emergency and other service agencies. It is imperative that this solution is both affordable (ie that calls are priced at standard rates) and accessible (larger text and a shorter card number on prepaid cards, for example).
- It is also important that telecommunications solutions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including telephony, focus on responses that are both **equitable and forward-looking**. Queensland Government agencies support the potential coordination and integration across Connect Australia programs — in particular, *Backing Indigenous Ability* and Mobile Connect — **to establish mobile telephony in remote communities**.

In addition, however, *BIA* guidelines need to ensure that Indigenous communities are **in a position to benefit from future telecommunications opportunities**, including internet-based voice services. Integration of VoIP services and training could provide a useful foundation for addressing technical support needs and support the operational sustainability of projects.

Public internet access

Queensland Government agencies consider provision of public internet access to be essential. As participation in the information and knowledge society becomes increasingly necessary for individuals to take part effectively in contemporary society, lack of access and skills becomes an issue of social exclusion. The successful roll out of public internet access in Queensland public libraries clearly demonstrates the benefits of providing free access to ICT.

Hub communities are appropriate sites for public internet access facilities, if access is provided in a location that is able to proactively offer relevant, ongoing training in the use and potential of the internet. Organisations with existing, staffed facilities, such as libraries or community centres, where staff have the capacity to train or assist people in the effective use and potential of this technology, should be given priority for the installation of public internet access. These locations are the most likely to operate long term, sustain positive outcomes and support community 'ownership' of the initiative.

Larger hub communities also offer the potential to integrate training/upskilling with initiatives that generate broader economic and social benefits, such as the establishment of a call centre or tourism initiative, or pilot projects for small business proposals. This approach strengthens the relationship between ICT training and employment.

Q3 Should the installation of community phones into Indigenous communities be regarded as a priority under *Backing Indigenous Ability*?

Q7 Are hub communities the appropriate location for implementing public access Internet facilities?

¹ http://www.dcita.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/32720/Factsheet_CommunityPhones.pdf

Q8 How could priority sites for Internet facilities be identified?

Any community without public internet access should be considered a priority site. The decision to provide public internet access should respond to a community development model rather than to a business model. Organisations providing public internet access need to be able to meet the above commitment to training, as a basis for developing community demand. It is unrealistic to apply a business model that involves charging community members for a service they have hitherto been unaware of and may not even know they need. There should be a commitment to providing this service free of charge.

Q 9 Is it appropriate to use an application process for communities to identify a need for Internet facilities? If so, what should be the key elements of the application process?

An application process could potentially be an effective way to determine communities that have the capacity to support a public internet access facility, if supported by effective community consultation processes that build community 'ownership' of the initiative. Key elements of the application should include possible gaps identified; details of potential users and other ICT facilities available in the community; the proposed location for the facility, justification for that location within the community, and staffing available to support the initiative; and an overview of proposed awareness raising and training activities.

Q10 Once implemented in a community, how best can the use of the facilities be encouraged?

Public internet access in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will need **ongoing financial support** to maintain the connection and equipment and give community members the opportunity to become comfortable with the technology. Part of this financial commitment needs to be in the form of **training that is meaningful at a local level and demonstrates practical uses of the technology for improving daily quality of life** (preferably conducted through organisations that have a permanent presence in the community). This training will vary from community to community.

Over time, community demand for public internet access may be such that local councils can see value in, and potentially contribute to, maintaining the connection or developing business partnerships (hosting websites for local industry, cultural tourism, distance education etc). However, expectations that public internet access in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will be fully financially sustainable are unrealistic, and it is necessary to recognise that some level of ongoing government intervention and subsidy will be required. This will be most effective if delivered through existing organisations that already have significant infrastructure, networks and established staffing structures.

Q11 Are there more innovative models of delivering Internet access to Indigenous communities?

Wireless technology (already in use by Cape York Digital Network) enables a decentralised model for providing public internet access. This model would involve having **several points for public internet access in the one community** (library, health centre, youth centre, shop etc.) rather than one centralised service. This model may be particularly valuable in communities that lack cohesion and where different interest groups co-opt different areas or services, effectively making them 'off-limit' to other groups.

Videoconferencing

Access to videoconferencing has the potential to address a range of needs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including:

- government service delivery, including access to justice and health services, and education;
- linking students studying away from home and people in detention centres with their families; and
- business development purposes, such as providing links to government or prospective business partners.

The vast majority of this activity is facilitated by government agencies. Given the low penetration of personal computers into homes, it is likely that demand for

videoconferencing services — at least in the short to medium term — will continue to be from this source.

Q13 What factors are contributing to the low use of videoconferencing facilities in many communities?

While some effort has been made to encourage agencies at both federal and state level to take advantage of videoconferencing services, increased use will depend on **how effectively gaps and weaknesses in service provision and effective ICT management processes** are addressed. Agencies such as the Department of Justice and Attorney-General, for example, require not only high quality reliable infrastructure, but also efficient management processes that ensure specific requirements are met, such as those related to confidentiality and availability at nominated times.

Q15 What can be done to ensure that videoconferencing facilities introduced into a community are widely used?

Queensland Government agencies recommend that *Backing Indigenous Ability* program guidelines **support a videoconferencing needs analysis for government and other service providers** in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to complement the more general ICT 'stocktake' discussed above. This process would identify the specific requirements of service providers and enable targeted, coordinated responses that would help to drive demand for videoconferencing services and inform agency decisions about the maintenance and expansion of their videoconferencing networks.

Q 16 Is it appropriate to use an application process for communities to identify a need for videoconferencing facilities?

Videoconferencing facilities, in this context, are part of a system, rather than stand-alone items — their value lies in their contribution to the formation of an integrated service with its resulting benefits to a network of communities.

A community-based application process, in the case of videoconferencing, may result in 'piecemeal' outcomes that could undermine the potential functionality of an effectively designed network and may add to inefficiencies that result in additional costs at the implementation stage.

Training and skills development

Q18 How best can skill gaps be identified?

- The Queensland Government supports a network of 24 Indigenous Employment and Training Support Officers who identify training needs and provide culturally appropriate mentoring and support to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander apprentices, trainees and vocational students during the course of their employment and/or training program. **There would be significant value in using the knowledge and experience of the Indigenous Employment and Training Support Officers to identify ICT training needs.**

- **Skills audits should be conducted on the ground** in each community. The skills audit should identify the number of people who have no knowledge of the technology, the skill levels of recreational and work-related users, ICT programs running in local schools and requirements for local technical support personnel.

Q19 What types of training and skills development sessions on telecommunications are appropriate and how should these be implemented?

- Queensland Government agencies support contextualised training and skill development that **complements and supports other economic independence initiatives**. Experience has shown that community members are 'jaded' by training that does not lead to employment. *Backing Indigenous Ability* program design needs to include **a strong focus on facilitating employment outcomes**.

This requires flexible program guidelines that enable *BIA* applicants to make connections with and add value to projects with a broader education and skill building approach. The *Computer Culture* project (Cape York Partnerships), for example, uses cultural transmission as a means of engaging families and the community in digitally-based educational activities with their children and young people. Through partnerships, the project aims to build the capacity of parents and education leaders to take active responsibility for education by

providing training and employment opportunities and facilitating local involvement in education decision making. This approach offers a range of opportunities for ICT-based capacity building through *BIA*, such as supporting internal secondment programs for staff professional development.

As the lead Commonwealth agency responsible for Cape York, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) could play an active role in whole-of-government coordination between Commonwealth agencies that integrates *BIA* opportunities with the broad range of employment and education programs.

- Recent changes in Queensland legislation are preparing the way for improved governance in Aboriginal communities. Deed of Grant in Trust communities in Queensland are transitioning to have the same status and authority as other local councils throughout the state. The Queensland Government is supporting this process with a range of strategies, such as the Community Governance Improvement Strategy, which address skills needed for effective governance in terms of organisational decision-making and accountability, business administration and civic participation. A complementary initiative, the Online Monitoring Service, will assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander councils, where necessary, to monitor their financial position and transactions. The system will rely upon councils having relatively uniform computer hardware, networking status, internet connections and accounting programs.

Queensland Government agencies urge the Australian Government, through *Backing Indigenous Ability*, to **commit resources to capacity building initiatives that partner with and complement Queensland's approach** to hardware and software implementation and skill building in the area of local council governance. Such funding would also support Queensland's commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander non government organisations through the *Strengthening Indigenous NGOs* project, which addresses specific management and service challenges faced by Indigenous service providers.

- A component of the skills audit identified above needs to be an **investigation into proposed uses of the technology and the interests of the community** (setting up small businesses, cultural tourism, communicating with family, oral history etc). **Different training will be required for different age and interest groups**. As skill levels improve, different uses for the technology will emerge and require more specialised training (web page development, ebusiness, graphic design, distance education etc).
- An effective grants program will support existing organisations such as Lagaw Asmer Communications (LAC) and Cape York Digital Network (CYDN), as well as registered training organisations (RTOs) such as Learning Network Queensland, the State Library of Queensland (Indigenous Knowledge Centres), the Mulga Training Network, or other established RTOs. These organisations already work directly in and with local communities, maintain established networks and positive relationships with community members, and have an understanding of community interests, needs and goals that can inform the development of appropriate ICT-based initiatives.
- These strong relationships with communities will facilitate community ownership of training and skills development programs run through such organisations, and encourage community participation and support. Communities may, for example, **provide in-kind support** for a team of local people to be trained as trainers and technical support staff, or support projects that engage the community, such as digital storytelling, digital photography,

Q21 How could communities support appropriate training and skills development programs?

creation of local tourism web pages, scanning photographs and communicating with distant family. Participants who show interest in projects such as these can go on to do accredited training or be identified as advocates for ICT in the community.

Q22 What obstacles exist for the successful delivery of training and skills development?

- A significant obstacle to successful training and skills development is a **lack of continuity and coordination**. The training offer needs to be permanent and sequential, offering all levels of training, tailored to meet local needs. This will be facilitated, as discussed above, by funding established organisations that have the capacity to provide ongoing service.

Community champions

Q23 Are community champions an appropriate way to engage the community and assist them in using telecommunications technology?

- While the literature and experience note the *role* of community champions in promoting ICT use in communities, the actual *use* of the term in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities may be counterproductive. **The term 'champion' can be culturally inappropriate**, for example, with the possible effect of deterring potentially suitable people who do not want to 'promote' themselves above others. It may be appropriate to determine another term that more specifically captures the idea of advocacy or promotion of community use of ICT. Consultation with communities may assist in identifying such a term.

Q24 What roles could community champions play within communities?

- **Trained and appropriately remunerated staff will be the cornerstone** of effective development of community use of ICT, if supported by a level of commitment by community leaders and councils to the role of ICT.

- **Entrepreneurship/business skills would be highly valued**, to assist advocates in encouraging business development.

- A further role for ICT advocates could include ensuring that **equipment is maintained** and fully functional at all times. Community members will have little interest in using this technology if it is not working or the connection is unreasonably slow. Once a basic condition of reliability can be assured, training and promotion of this technology can proceed, aided by the ICT advocates.

- In addition, the role could potentially encompass **liaison with carriers, and a community/consumer advisory role**.

Q25 How could community champions be identified within regions and communities?

- In many instances **community ICT advocates will need to be 'created'** (not identified) through the provision of appropriate training. However, these individuals should be respected community members and/or informal leaders — including women, who have considerable informal influence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. More than one advocate will be needed per community to ensure there is continuity to cover periods of staff change. Advocates will need the opportunity to upgrade their skills on a regular basis and to train others.

- The Remote Area Teacher Education Programme (RATEP), James Cook University, where students stay in their communities while studying for a Bachelor of Education, may be a source of 'part-time' advocates who could partner with/mentor other advocates.

Q26 What would be the best way to engage and compensate community champions for their role?

- Paid ICT advocates need to be **competitively compensated to stop the skill drain** from communities. People with ICT skills are sought after by mining companies in remote parts of Queensland, who are able to pay high wages. This will need to be taken into account in considering the remuneration of individuals in this role.

- Volunteers could also play an important role in supporting paid ICT advocates. However, they **need to be seen to be valued** by provision of professional development opportunities — for example, training, mentoring, networking, recognition through participation in advisory groups, support for conference attendance.

Q27 What models of delivering increased culturally appropriate content to the Internet could be introduced under *Backing Indigenous Ability*?

Culturally appropriate content

The availability of digital technology presents an excellent opportunity for Indigenous communities to record and archive culturally significant materials that can then be shared with the diaspora, the majority of whom are now living in urban settings, far from their tribal lands.

The recording and archiving of this material is an excellent means for developing skills. State Library of Queensland has begun work in this area by inviting communities to apply for funding under the *Queensland Stories* project, to enable them to tell one of their own stories in digital format. The project includes the provision of equipment and, most importantly, training with a film maker in the use of this technology. A similar project is underway with *Picture Queensland*, which involves the digitisation of many photographs from the Library's collection. Many photographs that pertain to Indigenous communities have been returned to these communities in digital format for identification and for instructions regarding the access to be allowed in relation to these images.

Development of culturally appropriate material is also a key element in literacy initiatives that are often delivered via internet. The State Library of Queensland has worked with some local libraries to produce local readers that have been very popular with children. Funding to allow this to be done systematically, and in conjunction with Education Queensland, would be valuable.

Backing Indigenous Ability funding could also make a significant impact in the recording and archiving of Indigenous languages and in the availability of historic recordings and teaching materials. Projects such as the Traditional Knowledge Recording Project (TKRP) (Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation) ensure the survival of cultural knowledge through digital recording and storage of traditional knowledge, using innovative mentoring and management practices. The recently released *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005* notes that Queensland is one of the states most lacking in language centres and the means to teach and maintain Indigenous languages. *BIA* support to expand and link existing projects such as TKRP into wider networks, particularly those related to cultural and economic development (such as employment and training, education and land management initiatives and networks) could increase both project sustainability and the potential for positive outcomes in a range of spheres.

Q30 What funding approaches could be adopted to encourage the recording and archiving of culturally significant material under *Backing Indigenous Ability*?

Appropriate access to culturally sensitive materials is an issue that continues to receive great attention. State Library of Queensland has developed protocols for accessing and using Indigenous materials held by the Library. National organisations such as AIATSIS have already developed access protocols for digital materials delivered via the internet, with different levels of access available depending upon the relationship of the viewer to the material. Further development and wider availability of this content management system would be welcome.

Digital management and most importantly, digital preservation, therefore, is a key and complex issue. Funding to look at digital preservation solutions is vital to avoid situations where culturally important information is doubly lost. Repository systems in major institutions such as AIATSIS, universities and State Libraries should be supported, linked to strict access protocols, as decided by the relevant communities.

Q31 Who should facilitate demand aggregation within communities and regions? Is it appropriate that ICCs, regional agents and community champions assist with demand aggregation or should alternative models be implemented (for example using a demand aggregation broker)?

Demand aggregation

Demand aggregation is the process of stimulating, quantifying and marketing potential demand for regional broadband services that have not been identified and met by telecommunications suppliers, and aggregating that demand across both commercially-viable towns and less commercially-attractive outlying communities to bring new broadband infrastructure and services to entire regions.

Facilitation by the Department of State Development, Trade and Innovation and catalyst funding of \$770,500 (GST exclusive) since 2004–05 has assisted regional communities to secure more than \$1.77 million of Australian Government funding for demand aggregation projects.

The Queensland Government has channelled its support to local communities through Regional Organisation of Councils and Regional Development Boards and helped them to access funds under the Australian Government's Demand Aggregation Program as part of the National Broadband Strategy. The Department of State Development, Trade and Innovation, the Department of Public Works and the Office of the Coordinator-General are also exploring opportunities to secure Federal funding under the Connect Australia program.

The Queensland Government seeks to assist Queensland regional areas with demand aggregation processes through the *Regional Self Help Guide* (RSHG). The RSHG has been developed as a framework for partnering with regional communities to strengthen their local economic growth opportunities through greater utilisation of ICT — in particular, access to telecommunications that will improve productivity and competitive advantage of existing industries, as well as diversify the regional economic base.

It is unrealistic to expect, however, that demand aggregation will generate sufficient demand in most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, given their 'geographic isolation and economic disadvantages' (*BIA*, p. 3), to be financially sustainable without some measure of ongoing government intervention and subsidy. However, if lessons learned through previous experience with demand aggregation are modified appropriately to apply to Indigenous communities, demand aggregation may contribute to a range of benefits, as outlined in the discussion paper.

Demand aggregation is built on a comprehensive knowledge of:

- the nature and quality of initiatives and infrastructure that already exist in communities;
- gaps or weaknesses in service provision and effective ICT management processes; and
- projected future needs and demand.

Financial support to develop this knowledge base, via visits to the different sites and follow-up with central offices of organisations and government departments, would be a key step towards facilitating ongoing demand aggregation (see also response to 'Identified needs').

There is unlikely to be a 'one-size-fits-all' solution to demand aggregation. A strong community engagement process is therefore essential, through which community objectives and priorities can be identified, awareness can be raised, and a business case developed. In some communities, there are possible Indigenous business initiatives involved in demand aggregation which could be considered. The engagement process also addresses the possibility that smaller users who are unable to take out large service contracts (eg NGOs, individuals, small businesses), may be overlooked, particularly when ICCs and aggregation brokers are not physically based in communities.

Q37 How should funding be provided under *Backing Indigenous Ability*?

Funding models

Queensland Government agencies support a flexible mix of funding approaches to *Backing Indigenous Ability* projects.

These should be based, however, on an approach that makes **coordinated use of existing infrastructure and services** established by previous state or Australian Government initiatives, such as Cape York Digital Network, Learning Network Queensland, State Library of Queensland (Indigenous Knowledge Centres) and the Lagaw Asmer (Island Watch) project.

It is critical that overall strategic decisions are made about infrastructure, linking to Broadband Connect, Clever Networks and Mobile Connect, so that demand can be aggregated, avoiding duplication and preventing sub-utilisation of resources. Planning should take place at a state-wide level and via regional partnerships.

Strategic funding should be complemented by program funding to particular communities or areas of need, implemented through organisations such as those mentioned above. Flexibility in this approach includes recognising and validating broader community needs that can emerge with the implementation of ICT initiatives — in particular, allowing funds to organisations for access to specialist assistance when required eg:

- financial advice (especially for larger or regional community ICT projects);
- conflict resolution (dealing effectively with parochial rivalry, understanding community power structures); and
- marketing and communications advice (enhancing the credibility of the project in the eyes of the community).

Q40 How can communities be assisted to develop grants applications so as to compete on a more equal basis for funding?

Where program funding is used, communities should be nurtured through the grant application process.

- **Funding established organisations that work at community level will facilitate this process**, enabling communities to have access to grant writing, research, budgeting and other necessary skills.

Local BIA support officers should also be funded. These officers may be DCITA-funded State Government employees who would be linked closely into *Backing Indigenous Ability* structures and processes, and would be lynchpins in the Commonwealth–State relationship, in terms of cooperation, sharing of information and willingness to involve states and territories in earlier shaping and refining of projects to take greater account of strategic considerations.

- If, however, program funding is made available to individual community-run projects, there are a number of key points to be made.

Key to the success of any funding model is the ability of applicants to understand and navigate the formal requirements of the program, and to submit an appropriate application that successfully addresses identified needs. Respondents to the Networking the Nation (NTN) review process noted that the NTN application process required a sophisticated understanding of the potential of ICT to address community development needs and opportunities, as well as significant expertise in the application writing process itself. They suggested that these circumstances disadvantaged those who probably most needed the benefits of the program — that is, those with limited knowledge of ICT, inexperience in dealing with Australian Government bodies, and lacking the lobbying and community development skills needed to connect effectively with the NTN process.

It is critical therefore that *Backing Indigenous Ability* funding guidelines:

- **clearly outline the process, requirements and boundaries of the program** in jargon-free language
- are **streamlined to avoid burdening communities** with unnecessarily complex and demanding paperwork
- are **supported by the nominated officers described above who are able to provide advice to applicants** as they develop grant applications. A long application process could be instituted that works with communities to put a realistic proposal together. A process of this nature could take place over a year, and involve demonstrations and community workshopping of the range of options available.

The **inclusion of stakeholders such as state and local government, industry and community representatives on funding selection panels** would be a key means of ensuring that funding decisions are transparent, strategic and informed by local knowledge and networks.

Q41 In delivering *Backing Indigenous Ability* in a culturally appropriate manner, what should be done to enable acceptance and ownership of telecommunications technology to aid sustainability within Indigenous communities?

Culturally appropriate delivery of services

Projects funded by *Backing Indigenous Ability* should be considered in the long-term. Communities need to be involved from the beginning through meaningful consultation, demonstrations and workshopping, and provided with continuous and relevant support for a realistic period of time (3–5 years). Support should take the form of ensuring that training is relevant, ongoing and culturally appropriate (as outlined in the response to question 42 below), the equipment functions properly, that Internet connection fees are reasonable (or subsidised) and that the fullest range of possible uses of the technology are presented.

Successful outcomes for projects are impossible until the community makes the technology its own and is familiar enough with its potential and limitations to start harnessing it for local development. This takes time to build and sustain.

Q42 What are some best practices in engaging communities in the planning, development and implementation stages of introducing or improving telecommunications technology?

Appropriate delivery of telecommunications technology requires providers to take account of the social, cultural and economic environments of rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This includes:

- the use of accessible content that is culturally and locally meaningful (that is, where possible prepared by the community itself), and not reliant on literacy or prior learning;
- the establishment of interactive face-to-face and virtual networks for ongoing support; and
- currency and relevancy of training, which enables acquired knowledge and skills to be immediately transferred into the local context for meaningful purposes (for example, as in cicada.net's Online Documentary Training method).

Sustainability

Q43 How can telecommunications services delivered to Indigenous communities become operationally and financially sustainable and remain sustainable beyond the life of the package?

The discussion paper notes that 'Telecommunications services delivered to Indigenous communities need to be operationally and financially sustainable. Consequently the Department intends to include sustainability as an important criterion in any program design' (p. 16).

A range of factors is identified in the discussion paper as contributing to operational and financial sustainability, including aggregation of demand; the use of regional agents and ICCs to help identify community need; the use of community champions; the consolidation, installation and maintenance of physical infrastructure; training and skills development; and cultural appropriateness.

Queensland Government agencies endorse the broad scope of these contributing factors. As discussed above, experience has shown that **expectations of financial sustainability of ICT initiatives in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are unrealistic**, particularly at community level, and that some level of ongoing government intervention and subsidy will be required for such projects to be viable.

- The discussion paper itself notes that 'The scoping study concluded that the geographic isolation and economic disadvantages faced by remote communities meant that a commercial roll-out of telecommunications services could not be relied upon and that some form of intervention by Government was needed' (p. 3).
- The paper also notes as one of the program's proposed actions the opportunity to 'refresh equipment in current internet access points' (p. 6). It is evident, therefore, that previous projects funded under TAPRIC or Networking the Nation are not financially stable enough to refresh previously-funded equipment themselves. This was evident also in small, community-run NTN projects in non Indigenous rural communities.

Queensland Government agencies therefore suggest that a more holistic definition of 'sustainability' be made explicit, and underpin *Backing Indigenous Ability* program design. ICT projects need to be seen as one facet of a broader picture that relates to **community sustainability**. Using this broader, capacity building lens to look at community ICT projects means that 'sustainability' relates to the knowledge, skills, resources and relationships that a project generates for the community to build on in the future.

In relation to financial viability, **an alternative approach positions Indigenous ICT projects within a regional or state 'unit', and assesses financial sustainability at that level**. Some Indigenous communities, because of factors such as location, tourism or industry potential, may come over time to satisfy the commercial criteria for services. Other communities, such as those cited in the scoping study mentioned above, will never meet such criteria without intervention. Clustering 'profitable' and 'non-profitable' projects into a single unit supports a more flexible and responsive approach to community needs for ICT infrastructure and skills.

Relationships with industry

The discussion paper notes that 'Communities should also be encouraged to consider innovative and flexible approaches to achieving commercial sustainability in the absence of ongoing funding' (p. 22). Suggested approaches include developing partnerships with industry and taking advantage of new economic development opportunities.

Partnerships

The discussion paper suggests that cross-sectoral and cross-jurisdictional partnerships have significant potential to support the financial and operational sustainability of projects in the longer term. It notes, for example, that 'Partnerships could be formed with telecommunications industry participants or other corporate entities, and may assist communities with technical support, business assistance, financial management support or funding assistance.'

- **Supporting partnerships involving organisations** such as Lagaw Asmer Communications (LAC) and Cape York Digital Network (CYDN), as well as registered training organisations (RTOs) such as Learning Network Queensland, the State Library of Queensland (Indigenous Knowledge Centres), the Mulga Training Network, or other established RTOs, is an

Q44 What innovative and flexible approaches could be used by communities to aid in the sustainability of telecommunications technology?

effective way of leveraging funds and resources for more sustainable outcomes. Such organisations, as discussed above, work directly in and with local communities, maintain established networks and positive relationships with community members, and have an understanding of community interests, needs and goals that can inform the development of appropriate ICT-based initiatives.

Several of the organisations listed above also have existing training and technical support programs in very remote areas, including Indigenous communities, through the DCITA-funded IT Training and Technical Support Program.

This strategy is preferable to that of funding individual community-based projects for the following reasons:

- Maintaining small community-based initiatives necessarily requires substantial commitments of time, energy and support on the part of individuals, which may not be available in a community over the long term.
- The fragmented nature of small community-based projects can mean that social and physical resources such as skills, information, network contacts and course materials are less easily shared, and that communities do not benefit from learnings shared across communities.
- Small community-based projects often require access to broader support that may not be available within their community or their funding limits/guidelines. For example, projects may require access to specific marketing, financial or management advice.
- Established organisations such as those mentioned above have the governance and organisational capacity to establish and support structures such as technical help desks and traineeship schemes, networking and mentoring of community ICT ‘advocates’, and websites/newsletters that facilitate sharing of resources and ideas. Individual community projects are unlikely to have the capacity to support such initiatives.

Individual community-based projects, as noted above, rarely meet requirements for financial sustainability. A funded RTO, however, is potentially able to balance the costs of training (for example) in both ‘profitable’ and ‘unprofitable’ communities.

Q45 How could telecommunications industry participants be encouraged to form partnerships with Indigenous communities? What form might these arrangements take?

- Positive outcomes are more likely if such relationships are **partnerships, based on a two way exchange of benefit, rather than one way sponsorships**. Partnerships recognise as well as build community skills and assets, without creating a further burden on the community — for example, communities may be able to test beta software or contribute to a resource collection in return for assistance with broader technical support. Sponsorships put the relationship at risk when the sponsoring organisation identifies new priorities for its philanthropic budget and withdraws support.
- Partnerships with ‘telecommunications industry participants or other corporate entities’, as suggested in the *Backing Indigenous Ability* discussion paper (p. 22), tend to be highly sought. It is possible that cross-organisational partnerships with community-based RTOs or organisations such as LAC or CYDN would be more attractive to industry than relationships with individual initiatives, offering greater reach and value in a more coordinated manner.

Q46 In what ways can local Indigenous Australians assist in service delivery of telecommunications in Indigenous communities

Economic development opportunities

Two Queensland Government priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are sustainable economic development and employment. Queensland Government agencies therefore strongly support the potential of ICT-related small business initiatives to provide positive outcomes for Indigenous communities.

The Queensland Department of State Development, for example, is one of several sponsors of the Cape York Development Corporation Business Hubs project. The CYDC business hubs support Indigenous businesses to start operating in a lower risk environment, providing encouragement, mentoring, and advice related to business modeling/planning, venture capital and services such as bookkeeping. *BIA* support for economic development projects such as the business hubs would have substantial positive flow-on effects into communities in a range of ways, including ICT literacy and employment.

Backing Indigenous Ability program guidelines need to be sufficiently flexible to **encompass broader ICT-related requirements** such as fax machines or business software (including upgrades, virus protection and firewall subscription services and support), where need and demand have been clearly identified for a particular project.

Sustainability of enterprises

- As discussed above, the potential commercial sustainability of enterprises in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is strongly influenced by 'geographic isolation and economic disadvantages' (p. 3). The Queensland Government has taken important steps toward addressing such issues through the Queensland Indigenous Economic Development Strategy, which encompasses the Cape York Partnerships and Ten Year Partnerships economic development programs, and is based on extensive consultation with representative Indigenous organisations.

Queensland Government agencies note, however, the significant challenges facing remote Indigenous community enterprises in achieving 'commercial sustainability in the absence of ongoing funding' (p. 3) and support the point made in the discussion paper that 'levels of risk will need to be set appropriately to allow such initiatives to be funded along with broad terms for measurement of success' (p. 3).

It is also essential to note that the commercial viability of previous ICT-based enterprises in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as Cape York Digital Network, has been **affected by policy and program decisions that have placed successful funding applicants in competition with each other** for the same markets. Given the nature of these markets due to limited size, demand and available disposable income, the fragmentation of demand and service provision has a direct impact on the ongoing sustainability of enterprises. This can only be addressed by a coordinated approach that supports and works with existing organisations.

- The *Backing Indigenous Ability* discussion paper notes the role of more advanced telecommunications services in enhancing economic development and self-sufficiency. It is important to remember, however, that significant numbers of rural and remote Indigenous businesses in every sector start with minimal telecommunications infrastructure, and still require basic operational telephone and facsimile connections.

- Equipment maintenance and renewal are key elements for operational sustainability. The availability of a pool of local technical support personnel is essential to this kind of sustainability. Partnerships and coordination between all technology providers/users in the community will be needed to maintain and share this pool of technical expertise.
- A greater number of entrepreneurial opportunities may exist for Indigenous ICT businesses to offer telecommunications services in rural and regional areas. It is therefore also important to recognise and support entrepreneurial opportunities that may exist for Indigenous businesses in less remote geographical locations.

An integrated approach

Q47 How should *Backing Indigenous Ability* facilitate arrangements with communities?

- The *Partnerships Queensland* framework integrates and consolidates all current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy in Queensland. The framework aligns existing policy initiatives under a common set of goals and mechanisms for change.

A key engagement mechanism employed under *Partnerships Queensland* is the use of Negotiation Tables, which involve a sustained process of consultation, planning and negotiation between community leaders and local, state and federal government agency representatives.

The 'Agreement on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Service Delivery between the Commonwealth of Australia and the Government of Queensland 2005–2010' highlights the role of Negotiation Tables when engaging with communities in Queensland.

Under *Partnerships Queensland*, the Queensland Government also has nominated Community Champions who are assigned to a number of remote communities to represent the government in planning and delivering community-specific services. The Champions, officers at the director-general level, play an important role in Negotiation Tables. There may also be scope to expand their role to champion community ICT requirements.

Queensland Government agencies consider it appropriate that engagement related to the identification of telecommunication needs and funding, including issues related to community phones, public internet access and training and skills requirements, **utilise the Negotiation Table and Community Champion processes and structures** where possible.

The Queensland Government also works closely at the regional level with **Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICCs)**. This relationship provides a further channel to facilitate the rollout of *Backing Indigenous Ability* into communities.

- Experience with previous funding programs has indicated difficulties associated with effective dissemination of program information, particularly to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses. This issue could be addressed by **utilising the Queensland Government Department of State Development and Innovation's existing links with Indigenous business**. These include:
 - State Development Centres;
 - Indigenous Enterprise Development Officers; and
 - Indigenous Business Development Hubs (of which there are presently three — Torres Strait, Cape York and Brisbane, with officers located in smaller regional areas such as Weipa and the Northern Peninsula Area

(NPA), and the likelihood of a fourth hub in 2007 in Western Queensland).

Other potential avenues for dissemination of program information include **Indigenous Community Volunteers (ICV)** (a not-for-profit company primarily funded by the Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace Relations), and **utilisation of the CDEP system**. Many CDEPs are informal hubs in their communities, and have initiated business development activities.

- The integration of *Backing Indigenous Ability* elements into Shared Responsibility Agreements may be problematic in some communities. Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities deal with many competing priorities. As noted at the 2005 Indigenous Telecommunications Forum, this can mean that communities have little or no time to learn about and deal with new ICT technologies.

It is unrealistic to ask communities to share responsibility for a service with which they are unfamiliar. While areas such as health and education are familiar, public internet access or the development of web content, for example, may be unfamiliar and/or considered non-essential. Addressing this issue may require subsidisation of existing organisations and services (such as health centres, libraries, youth centres etc) to provide internet access, and promotion to the community via projects, relevant training, recreational use etc, until such time as both local councils and the community in general are aware of the benefits that it can provide to their community. Further developments would then be more appropriately addressed by Shared Responsibility Agreements.

Using existing infrastructure

Q50 How can existing infrastructure and services in communities be used to provide access to a wider range of uses and users from the community?

Queensland Government agencies **support the coordinated use of existing infrastructure and services**, established through previous state or Australian Government initiatives. Structures such as the State Library's network of public libraries, Cape York Digital Network, Learning Network Queensland and the Lagaw Asmer (Island Watch) project represent significant financial and social investment by both governments and communities, and provide a potential foundation for strategic partnerships and collaboration that could support future project sustainability.

This approach also provides opportunities to learn from previous experience, and particularly to build on, adapt and/or strengthen already successful models.

It is important therefore that *Backing Indigenous Ability* policy and program decisions potentially **value-add to existing investments, avoid duplication** and circumvent the potential, as noted above, for successful funding applicants to be **placed in competition with each other for limited markets**.

The use of existing infrastructure would be supported by the development of an up-to-date and comprehensive knowledge base related to the nature and quality of initiatives and infrastructure that exist in communities (see response to question 2 above).

Consultation

Q51 Are there any other key stakeholders that should be consulted in the design and implementation of *Backing Indigenous*

The relatively short time frame available for community consultation on *Backing Indigenous Ability* impacted on the extent to which state governments could consult directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations — particularly those in more remote areas — within their jurisdictions. Where possible, the Queensland Government has liaised with

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contacts working in and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, in order to raise awareness of the *BIA* discussion paper and encourage contribution of their views.

Integration with Connect Australia

Q52 How best can *Backing Indigenous Ability* link in with the other elements of Connect Australia to ensure an efficient and effective delivery of telecommunications into Indigenous communities?

Funding of *Backing Indigenous Ability* elements should always be considered in conjunction with other elements of *Connect Australia*, given the high level of need for telecommunications infrastructure in Indigenous communities. A broad and strategic overview of the needs of currently under-served communities may highlight the ways in which the different elements of *Connect Australia* should be applied for maximum benefit.

In particular, there should be close integration between the two key elements of the *BIA* program. With the increasing availability of broadband access and the integration of technologies from telecommunications and broadcasting, the current *BIA* guidelines need to be able to support projects that exploit these emerging capabilities.

Evaluation

Q53 How best can the progress of *Backing Indigenous Ability* be monitored and assessed?

The establishment of a close working relationship across jurisdictions, and particularly the funding of state-based *BIA* project officers (see also the response to question 40 above) would facilitate monitoring of *Backing Indigenous Ability* projects. Project officers could systematically make contact with project teams, undertake community visits, and potentially support projects in their state with progress reporting requirements. This support and liaison role would ensure that problems in projects would be identified early, and could be linked into assistance mechanisms such as those described in the response to question 37 above.